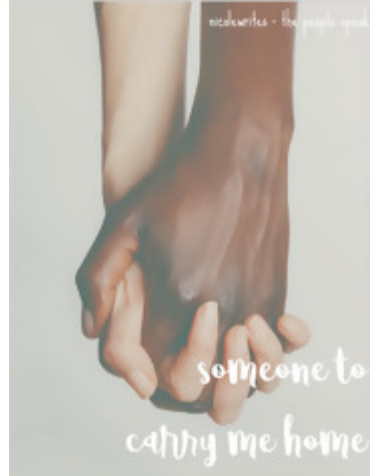




someone to
carry me home

someone to carry me home by The People Speak

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Friendship, Romance

Language: English

Characters: Dustin H., Eleven/Jane H., Lucas S., Max M.

Pairings: Lucas S./Max M.

Status: Completed

Published: 2019-07-07 18:28:11

Updated: 2019-07-07 18:28:11

Packaged: 2019-12-12 18:49:03

Rating: T

Chapters: 1

Words: 7,672

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: "Max Mayfield likes a very specific list of things: rockstars, skateboards, old fashioned arcades, California, and sarcasm. Notably, people do not rank high on her list of positive things. Neither does Indiana and yet here she is." Lucas and Max and a memorable first year.

someone to carry me home

Max Mayfield likes a very specific list of things: rockstars, skateboards, old fashioned arcades, California, and sarcasm. Notably, people do not rank high on her list of positive things. Neither does Indiana and yet here she is.

Purdue is a good school. Purdue is, really, a great school, and she should be pleased to be here, but as she drags her suitcase behind her into the elevator, all she can think of is the acceptance letter to UCLA that she had pinned above her desk. Max sighs and jams the button for the ninth floor.

UCLA would have been great, but Max couldn't stay in California. She had had to leave the city, leave the state, and get as far away as possible to somewhere that her mother and her stepfather and Billy would never even consider visiting. So she picked Purdue and now she is here in Indiana for god knows why.

Thankfully her room isn't too far from the elevator, and she manages to lug all her stuff in after only two trips. There is a little cloud with her name scribbled in it on her door and she quickly rips it down. She glances up and down the hallway, but no one seems to be out of their room, so she slips into her room and closes the door.

She doesn't have a roommate—thank god—and her dorm room is small and pretty old, but it's better than the pictures she had seen. She drops her suitcase to the ground with a heavy thud and dumps her backpack on the bare mattress of the bed. She sits on the mattress and exhales slowly.

It took entirely too long for her eighteenth birthday to come so that her mother was comfortable with letting her leave, but she was out. She was away from her stepdad and away from Billy and she, if it could be helped, was never going back. She had moved to Indiana for school so she figured she would throw herself into school for four years, get a job, and move out of Indiana, even further away from California.

There is a loud thud from the room to her right which is followed by

a loud, feminine giggle. Max flops back on her bed and sighs. She's pretty sure the people who room on that side of her are boys, so that means at least one of them probably has a girlfriend. The walls in dorms are notoriously thin and now she can look forward to sex noises on top of everything else.

This is why Max doesn't like people.

It's a week and a half into classes before Max finally meets one of her neighbours. Surprisingly, the room has been pretty quiet, other than the occasional chatter, but she has heard a girl's voice here and there. She's just stepping into the elevator to head back to her room after a particularly exhausting chemistry lecture when a guy darts forward and holds the elevator door open so he can slip inside. He smiles at her and reaches to press a button, but freezes when he sees that she's already pushed the one for the ninth floor.

"You're on nine, too?" he asks.

She glances at him and takes in his appearance. He's dark-skinned with sharp eyes and a whip-crack smile and Max almost lets herself think that he's cute before she nods to answer his question.

He shuffles his feet and his smile wavers with his nerves for a second. "Cool, what room are you?"

"982," she answers because she might as well humour him, if at least for the elevator ride.

His brow rises. "I'm in 984, so we must be right next to each other."

Max immediately quashes any thoughts of his good looks because if this is her neighbour, it's definitely his girlfriend that she's heard through the wall. "Yeah," she replies idly. She glances at the elevator display as the number six shifts into a seven. Still two floors to go.

"I don't think I ever saw your nameplate," he continues and Max exhales because she really just wants this stupid cute neighbour to shut up. "What's your name?"

"Max," she replies shortly. She doesn't bother asking for his name,

because then she has a name to match a face, which is something she really doesn't want.

Of course, because he's that type of guy, he gives one anyways. "I'm Lucas. Engineering student," he says. He holds out a hand and Max knows that it would be the ultimate asshole move not to shake it, so she does.

"Chemistry," she offers in return.

Lucas grins. "Wicked, chem's a tough one."

Max shrugs. "As long as I'm not writing essays."

"Ha, yeah you're talking to an engineer there, so I agree."

His wit makes her crack a smile right as the elevator dings and the doors open onto their floor. Max steps out and Lucas follows her, keeping pace as they walk towards their rooms. Max stops in front of her room and digs in her pocket for her room key. Lucas hovers, a little awkwardly, just to her right in front of his own door.

"My roommate, some friends from high school and I are going out for dinner tonight, if you were interested in joining us at all."

Max bites her lip. "I would, but I've got a lab in two days that I really need to prepare for. Thanks anyways though."

Lucas shrugs and slides a hand into one of his pockets. "I didn't think there was any harm in asking."

Max turns the key in her lock and opens her door. She steals one last look at the cute neighbour. "No, not really." He gives her a lop-sided smile as she slips inside her room.

She drops her bag to the floor and sighs deeply. She's here for school, not to get distracted by cute boys, even if they live next door. Besides, he's attractive enough that the girlfriend next door must be his so it doesn't matter anyway.

Because, of course, it turns out that Max and her cute neighbour run

the same schedule on Tuesdays and Thursdays. They both get back from class or dinner or the library at 7:30 sharp and take the elevator to the ninth floor together.

Max tries really hard not to care, but Lucas is cute and funny and genuinely interesting to talk to. Plus, when she calls him 'Stalker' his smile gets a little lopsided and her heart does flips when he calls her 'Mad Max', so frankly, they fall into an easy routine of teasing and what might be—though Max isn't hopeful—flirting.

Whoever arrives in the lobby of the residence building pushes the elevator button first, but they always get on together. Lucas asks her about class and labs and she asks him about Indiana and if there is anything interesting out in the middle of nowhere both at school and where he's from.

Max doesn't make many other friends, a few from her classes, but it's nice to be able to say that she and Lucas are definitely beyond acquaintances now. Plus, he's still cute, so she can't really complain. She's a little confused as to why she and Lucas appear to be meeting up so often when she still hasn't met his roommate or the girlfriend.

It's mid-October and the first Midwestern winter chills are blowing in on the day that she meets the girlfriend. Max jerks her jean jacket tightly around her as she scurries into the building lobby, huffing out cold air. It's a Wednesday, which means no Lucas, so she heads right for the elevators.

There's another girl waiting for the elevators, her hands behind her back as she rocks onto her toes. Max avoids eye contact as she normally does with all people, but she can't help but notice that the girl doesn't look familiar at all, something unusual considering Max recognizes most people who live in the building now. Not to mention that with curly, shoulder-length brown hair and a delicate face, the girl is really, really pretty.

The elevators ding and Max slips inside first, quickly punching the button for her floor. The girl follows, and hesitates, exactly like Lucas had done back in September.

A needle of doubt pricks in Max's stomach and the selfish part of her brain chants, *Don't be his girlfriend, don't be his girlfriend.*

The girl snaps suddenly, pointing at Max. "Oh! You're Max! Lucas mentioned you!"

Max raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, I'm Max."

The girl smiled. "Jane Hopper, but everyone just calls me El." She stuck a hand out and Max awkwardly shook it.

Any hopes she had been harbouring of the pretty girl not being Lucas's girlfriend shrivel and die. Max forces a smile and adjusts her backpack. She glances at the elevator monitor: four floors left.

"You're the girlfriend then?"

El laughs. "Wow, I'm already getting that name. I guess I am."

Max smirks a little. "I'm glad the walls are thicker than the residence reviews said they would be."

Her quip finally triggers a response in the girl as her cheeks flare red instantly as she giggles nervously. Max waves her off.

"It's nice to meet you," she adds as an afterthought.

El smiles. For a blissful moment, there is silence before it is broken again. "Hey, I know Lucas has tried to invite you out with our friends before, but we're going out tonight again and it would be super cool if you joined us."

Max blinks in surprise. Lucas inviting her out was one thing because they were neighbours and sort of friends, but his girlfriend doing the same? Max casts her a look, suddenly feeling shy. She isn't used to having female friends so the eagerness in El's voice is new.

El smiles brightly again and Max finds herself nodding before she can really think. "Ok, sure," she replied.

"Cool! Why don't you drop your stuff and get whatever you need from your room and then just knock on the boys' door when you're

ready?"

The doors slide open on the ninth floor and Max's time to backpedal evaporates. "Sounds good," she forces out.

El smiles and the two girls walk side by side to the neighbouring rooms. El pauses to glance at Max's door before turning and knocking on Lucas's. "See you shortly!"

Max quickly slips inside her room so she doesn't have to see Lucas greet his girlfriend. She tosses her school bag onto her dresser and falls face-first onto her bed, groaning. At the very least this event would force her to meet more people, she thinks despondently. She pushes herself up and glances at her mirror.

She's wearing a vintage t-shirt emblazoned with The Eagles logo paired with ripped black jeans and her trusty jean jacket. It's a look she is proud of and she sees no reason to change. She grabs her purse and keys, runs her fingers through her curly red hair and slides out the door.

It takes her two full seconds of standing in the hallway to gather the courage to knock, but she finally does, rapping her knuckles against the wood three times.

The door swings open almost immediately and Max comes face to face with a grinning Lucas. He's wearing a plain blue t-shirt and grey jeans, but he makes it look effortlessly attractive and Max quashes down the internal girliness which was scoping him out.

"Max, hey! El said you were going to join us tonight!" Lucas's smile is easy-going and familiar and Max relaxes just a little. "Come on in," he says, opening the door wider.

She steps in and takes in the room. It's bigger than her room, with two desks, two closets, and two beds. Both sides are covered with various geek memorabilia. As she steps in, her gaze is drawn to El and the boy next to her that she presumes to be Lucas's roommate.

El and the roommate are sitting on the bed that she presumes to be not-Lucas's and the guy has an arm slung around El's shoulders as

they chat easily. El's eyes are bright and happy as she looks up at him. It only takes a second for everything to click in Max's mind.

El isn't Lucas's girlfriend. She is Lucas's roommate's girlfriend. The petty, jealous part of her instantly disappears and Max is relieved to suddenly be able to breathe again.

"Max, this is El, as you know, and my roommate, Mike, her boyfriend," Lucas introduces as he walks up behind her suddenly.

Mike grins at her. He was cute too, but certainly not her type. He's all lank with a messy mop of dark hair and a light spattering of freckles. "Nice to finally meet you, neighbour. I've heard all about you from Lucas, but it's funny we've never met."

Max laughs, her chest suddenly lighter. "Nice to meet you too, Mike."

There's a short, almost awkward pause, before there's another knock at the door. Lucas spins and heads to open it. Max glances back and sees him embrace whoever is at the door. Lucas steps aside and a guy with the wildest, curliest hair Max has ever seen steps in, grinning broadly.

"You must be Max! It's a pleasure to meet you," the new guy says. He steps forward and sticks out a hand.

Max shakes it and takes in his appearance. He's wearing jeans and a rumpled Back to the Future shirt with a green and yellow baseball cap. "Max Mayfield, the, apparently," she pauses, giving Lucas a sly look, "infamous neighbour."

Lucas just gives her a smile that makes her stomach flip. The new guy sizes her up.

"I'm Dustin, and I'm definitely the coolest out of any of these guys, so don't worry about a thing around me."

Lucas, Mike, and El all laugh at this statement and Max feels a genuine smile lift her lips too. "Good to know," she replies teasingly. *Friends*, her brain thinks giddily, *I think these people want to actually be my friends.*

As it turns out, Dustin is the craziest and everyone in the party loves to argue. After Dustin's arrival, the group had set out for a retro diner nearby where they met up with Will and Joe. Will was apparently a part of the original friend group from small-town Indiana, while Joe, Will's boyfriend, is a new addition that attends the high-scale Arts Institution that Will studies at in Lafayette.

They had crammed together into one of those oddly circular booths with El and Mike and Will and Joe smushing together. Max slides in next to El and Lucas follows her in, while Dustin sits on Joe's other side. The group is incredibly welcoming, telling funny stories and light-hearted jokes while catching up on school and social lives and stories from home.

They eat greasy burgers and fries and Max laughs so hard her stomach hurts. Joe's arm tucks around Will and Mike's does the same around El. Dustin doesn't bat an eye at any of it and neither does Lucas, so Max just assumes that the behaviour is absolutely normal for the group. At some point through the meal, Lucas's arm drapes along the top of the booth behind Max and she almost desperately wishes for it to drop down against her shoulder.

Still, she feels optimistic about things and ribs Lucas in time with the other friends and joins him in teasing Dustin or Mike about one thing or another. Joe and Will are the first to head out since they have to head across town back to their campus and El and Mike leave next, heading, apparently to El's dorm. Dustin shrugs bids Max and Lucas goodbye, heading back to his own place.

Lucas and her walk back together, a companionable silence settling between them.

"Your friends are cool," Max admits as they finally reach the entrance to their building.

Lucas grins. "I'll add you to our group chat. I think everyone really likes you and you should definitely hang out with us again. Plus, I think El will love not being the only girl around."

Max smiles faintly as she reaches out to punch the elevator button. Her hand gets there a split second before Lucas's and his finger jabs

onto hers and she recoils sharply. Lucas blinks in surprise and they make awkward eye contact before they both burst out laughing.

"Wow, that was stupid," he chuckles.

Max grins. "Yes, it was, Stalker."

The elevator doors open and they step in together. Lucas pushes the button for nine and the doors slide shut. There's an awkward pause before he looks at her.

"Hey, do you want to come over and watch a movie? I have a whole collection of stupid retro films I think you'd like."

Max finds herself smiling stupidly. "Only if we get to watch in my room. I'm almost 100 percent certain my bed will be more comfortable."

Lucas laughs and Max's stomach flips again. "Whatever helps you sleep better."

She jabs her elbow against his ribs, smirking. "Literally."

He snorts. "That one was bad, Mad Max."

She shrugs. "You set me up for it."

The one thing Max had not expected from befriending the Party, as they called themselves, was the sheer amount of nerdiness that came with them. Sure, she is studying Chemistry, but nothing prepared her for Engineer-Lucas, Biochemist-Dustin, Physicist-Mike, and Art Major-Will in full on geek mode. Sure, seeing Lucas and Mike's room might have warned her, but when someone knocks on her door at 7pm on a random Friday night, she isn't expecting El and Joe to ask her to save them.

Apparently, Friday nights are exclusively reserved for the Party's D&D sessions. Max has no issues with the game itself, just the fact that it routinely means shouting from next door as she tries to study. It does mean, however, that she gets to hang out with El and Joe a lot and make fun of their boyfriends and friends.

The one night she had dared sit in on a session out of morbid curiosity had been hilarious and actually almost interesting enough to sit in on a second, but the instant she had been asked by Lucas what she had thought, El had shaken her head frantically, telling Max that it was a terrible idea.

So Friday's become El-Max-Joe nights while the party plays D&D next door, and Saturday nights become Lucas-Max nights as they watch stupid 80s and 90s movies or really terrible horror movies. Dustin joins them occasionally, but it's mostly just Lucas and Max. Max loves Saturdays, but some part of her wedged deep inside refuses to let her ask Lucas if he thinks that their movie nights are kind of like date nights.

The Party makes plans to go home for Thanksgiving and Max ignores the calls from her mother insisting that she come home and she prepares to stay at school and be lonely. She isn't expecting Lucas to stare at her like she's lost her head when she says she isn't going home. She also definitely isn't expecting him to invite her back to small-town Hawkins to celebrate with his family. Not sure what else to do, she accepts, and the grin he gives her makes it worth it.

The drive back to Hawkins is three hours and her, Dustin, and Lucas all take turns DJing and singing along terribly to loud music. The three of them carpool in Lucas's car and he drives the whole way since Lucas mentions something about Dustin being a terrible driver. Max just laughs and calls shotgun, delegating Dustin to the backseat.

Hawkins is a criminally small town, but from the stories she has heard from the Party, it looks exactly like she expects. Lucas points out the Sheriff's office where El's dad works and the general store where Will's mom works and the tiny post office where Mike's sister and Will's brother both work part-time.

They drop Dustin off first, and all the nervousness that Max had been suppressing returns full-force as she realizes she is about to spend an entire weekend with Lucas and his family. Lucas doesn't pick up on it until he pulls up outside a quaint two-story house and he looks over at her.

"Jesus, Max, you're white as a sheet. Are you okay?" His hand finds hers where it sits limply on the console.

The touch is reassuring and gentle and Max exhales slowly. "Yeah, I guess I'm just grateful to be here. You really didn't have to do this."

Lucas shakes his head. "Hey, my family is legendary for Thanksgiving celebrations. I want you to be here, and I know my family will love you."

His confidence bolsters her own and she nods finally. "Okay, yeah, let's do this."

Lucas's mom is incredibly nice. His dad's a little rougher, but still warm and welcoming and Max understands where Lucas's kindness has come from. His family home is cozy and generous and a little loud, but it feels like a home. Lucas and his sister Erica bicker relentlessly, but the smiles that play on the faces of both parents let Max realize that this is exceedingly normal.

Compared to the brother-sister relationship she knows, and the relationship she has seen between her mother and step-father, everything that she sees at the Sinclair's is a huge breath of fresh air. Their adoration and love for each other shine through even in the barbed insults that get traded by the siblings. Still, Max loves Erica and her sass and Lucas's parents for being so incredibly kind to her.

They set her up in the guest bedroom and she sinks onto the mattress slowly, exhaling. It's almost overwhelming, the amount of love that is in this house. And it *hurts* to know that this is the kind of thing she missed out on back in California. She doesn't realize how long she just sits there numbly until Lucas is knocking on the doorframe.

He looks a bit concerned at her expression and he wanders in and sits next to her. "Earth to Max? Are you okay?"

Max shakes herself. "Yeah, yeah I'm great, actually. It's just nice to be in a place where Thanksgiving is a happy thing." She bites her tongue after she speaks and expects a prying question in response, but as always, Lucas tactfully avoids making her uncomfortable.

"My mom likes you already. Be careful, or you might find yourself invited back for Christmas and Easter." He says it like it's something terrible and Max laughs weakly. Spending the holidays with people who are pleasant and don't throw fists and scalding words at every opportunity has been her dream since her mother married Neil.

Max leans her head against Lucas's shoulder. He tenses for a moment before he relaxes, resting his head atop hers. "Thanks, Lucas," she mumbles softly.

Thanksgiving is a respite, a light in her darkness, and she feeds off of the feeling of family that it left her long past November and into December as Lucas drops her off at the airport to fly home to California for Christmas. They're wearing matching grey sweaters with 'Purdue' on them in gold and Max gives him a last smile before she slips out of his car.

She's grabbing her suitcase from his trunk when he walks up beside her. He places it on the ground and pulls her into a sudden hug. She squeezes him back and has to force back tears as he pulls away. She's going to miss him and the whole party over the break, but it's only just two weeks. A part of her wants to just jump back into the car and go to his place with him where his mother's smile and cooking and his father's jokes and stories and Erica's stubborn sass will have her laughing till her sides hurt, but she has to go home eventually.

Christmas sucks. Dinner is burnt and dry and tense and by the time Max gets on a flight back to school in the beginning of January, her Purdue sweater is hiding several bruises and a healing cigarette burn on her shoulders and arms. She was decidedly not coming home for summer, and not everyone in the house had been pleased with that news.

Mike and El pick her up from the airport because Lucas isn't back from Hawkins yet, but Max is still incredibly glad to see the couple. They chat on and on about their break and how much fun they had and how they got the whole group together except her and how obviously she was missed. Max smiles and sinks into the seat, relishing the fact that she was back in Indiana and that Billy and Neil were in California and it would be a long while before she would see

them again.

In early March, the whole party finds themselves at a house party halfway between Will and Joe's art school, and El's dorm on the east end of campus. The party is loud. Some popular rap song is blaring through the house, physically shaking it, but Max is buzzed enough that she's still having a good time. She and El had just finished destroying Mike and Dustin in a game of pong and now she was standing with Lucas and Dustin to one side of the room after Mike and El had disappeared to dance.

Dustin drains the last of his drink and looks in both Lucas and Max's cups. They're both nearly done too so Dustin taps the bottoms of them to encourage them to finish. Max tips hers back, swallowing the last of the cheap beer and passes it to Dustin with a sly grin. Lucas follows her lead.

"I shall return fair maiden and sir," Dustin says jokingly as he takes all three cups and vanishes to the back of the house, leaving Max and Lucas alone.

Lucas opens his mouth to say something, but as he does, the rap song abruptly changes to an AC/DC song that Max doesn't completely hate and she grins.

"Wanna dance, Stalker?"

Lucas gives her a lopsided smile. "Sure thing, Mad Max."

She grabs his hand and tugs him to the edge of the dance floor. Her hands land on his shoulders as she shimmies to the pounding beat, singing along with the rest of the party. Lucas's hands find her waist and they move together. He doesn't sing, but Max notices his eyes don't leave her face at all and he looks happy. The dance makes her deliriously happy: she's drunk and dancing with her friend/neighbour/definitely crush and it's a good night.

Everything is going great right up until the moment she feels a pair of firm hands fall deliberately onto her ass. Max wheels around, hands flying up to shove the guy molesting her, but they meet a solid chest

and the guy doesn't budge.

"What the hell?" she demands angrily. "Keep your hands to yourself, asshole."

The guy smirks and looks her up and down, eyes lingering on the deep scoop of her shirt. "Hey, an ass like this should be dancing with a guy who actually knows how to please a girl," he drawls casually. His hands mimic an hourglass shape in front of him and Max is barely able to restrain from punching him right then and there.

She can feel Lucas go rigid with fury behind her and his voice is like glass when he speaks. "Back off, Troy."

Troy, the douche, smirks and eyes Lucas. "What, Sinclair, scared she's gonna slip out with a real man?"

Max scoffs loudly. "Unlikely."

Troy's smug look flickers. "Come on, babe, let me give you a real ride." He reaches for her as if to grab her hips, and Lucas steps up quickly, snagging Troy's hand at the wrist.

"Touch her again," he says coldly. Troy's eyebrow lifts. "What are you gonna do about it, Sinclair?" His other hand drifts forward and Max steps back instinctively.

Just as she steps back, Lucas steps around her and decks Troy clean in the face. The douche recoils sharply, swearing. Lucas is rigid in front of her and Troy manages to get a clean swing back at him, catching the side of his face. Lucas jerks away from the punch and Troy goes for his stomach. His defensive body positioning saves him from the brunt of the blow, but Max can still hear the sick thus it makes against his stomach. She winces and Lucas crumples back from the hit. She reaches to steady him, and his hands grip onto her arms tightly as he swears darkly.

Max fixes Troy with a wicked glare and is glad to see that Lucas's shot got his nose which is bleeding and looks a little crooked. Just as it looks like the douche is about to go after Lucas again, his arm is caught by Dustin on the backswing. Max has never been so glad to

see the rest of their friends in her entire life. Dustin and Mike are at the front, twin images of anger and El, Will, and Joe stand just behind them.

"What going on?" Mike asks, his voice sharp as he glares at Troy. "Don't you have high schoolers to prey on or something?"

Dustin drops Troy's arm and the bully jerks away, quickly noticing he's outnumbered. He gives Max and Lucas one last dark look. "Crazy bitch isn't even worth my time," Troy growls before he disappears into the crowd.

Max tenses at the insult, but she can feel Lucas's body go rigid with offence and she squeezes his arms to ground him. "He's a dick, Lucas, it's fine."

Lucas stands up straight, glaring after where he disappeared to. "It's not fine. Troy's been harassing us since we were kids and he probably wouldn't have even gone after you if he hadn't seen us together."

El shakes her head. "It's not your fault Lucas, we all know what Troy is like." Lucas scowls and turns his head slightly away from Max.

Will frowns suddenly. "Jesus, Lucas, how hard did he hit you?"

Max's head snaps in Will's direction and she sees that he and the rest of the party are admiring the split skin and developing mark on the top part of Lucas's cheekbone. She frowns. "Anyone know where we can get some ice for that?"

Joe clears his throat. "Will and I were actually gonna head back to my suite and I know we have some in our freezer. You guys are welcome to crash there if you'd like." Max nods. She doesn't much feel like crossing campus in the dark at night since Joe's apartment-style suite is much closer.

"You're okay with this many people?"

"Mike and I can go to my dorm. It's close by," El says quickly.

"And I already promised Suzie I'd walk her home, so I'll crash there," Dustin adds.

Will shrugs. "We can figure out a makeshift mattress for one of you and the other can take the couch."

Lucas eyes Max. "You good with that?"

Max shrugs, giving him a small smirk. "No problems here, Stalker. We do need to get some ice on that though."

With plans set and the party winding down, Max follows Joe and Will out of the house, Lucas on her heels. The couple leads the way, Joe's arm dropped over Will's shoulders as they chat quietly, leaving Max with Lucas who has barely spoken to her since decking Troy.

The walk back to Joe's is only a few minutes. Joe's actual roommate, he informs them, barely lived in the suite, hence why there would be no issues. Will almost immediately disappears to Joe's bedroom, looking like he was going to collapse. Joe points out the freezer and then follows his boyfriend, also looking drained.

Max and Lucas are left standing in the kitchen alone. The light down the hall clicks off, confirming that there was going to be no funny business from the boys because they were tired. Max then immediately turns to the freezer, looking for an ice pack.

Contrary to Joe's statement, there is actually no ice the freezer; however, there is a bag of frozen peas which she passes to Lucas. Lucas accepts it and moves to sit on the couch in the suite. He stares blankly at the coffee table as he holds the peas to his face and Max frowns.

"Thank you, Lucas, for sticking up for me. You really didn't need to punch him though," she says after a long, awkward moment.

Lucas's warm eyes flick to her. He shrugs, keeping the frozen veggie's attaches to his cheekbone. "I kind of did. I've wanted to punch Troy since like third grade and the guy is a total asshole to girls."

Max chuckles darkly and walks out of the kitchen. "No argument from me there."

Lucas lets out a deep sigh. "I hate guys like that. Those who take

advantage of girls or look down on people because they're girls or they're gay or—" he cuts himself off suddenly, his gaze dark.

Max licks her lips. "Black?" she offers quietly. Lucas nods.

He sighs again. "Hey, it's better than it used to be."

She drops onto the couch next to him. "And thank god for that." She pauses. "I'm sorry people still treat you like that."

"As long as you never do, then you have nothing to apologize for." Billy's face and her stepfather's face flare across her memory and the rage they'd displayed when they'd met Angela, Max's only person of colour friend in California. She swallows and looks at Lucas again. She gets an eye full of frozen veggies covering dark skin and a curious look in return.

"Let me see it," she says, reaching up to pull the peas away. As she does she sees the raised edges of where the skin split and the slightly puffy, shiny skin where he was hit. His dark complexion is helpful in hiding the bruising, but the purple shading is already filling in, so the shiner is going to be good and obvious anyway.

Max laughs wryly. "God, if you were at least white like the rest of us losers I could help you cover that, but I don't think ivory shade foundation is going to be much of a help. Not even my neutralizes will help you."

Lucas blinks slowly at her, confusion muddling his expression. "Max, why do you know so much about covering bruises?"

She tenses. "Skateboarding," she replies instinctively, but the look on Lucas's face tells her that he doesn't buy it for a minute.

"Does this," he pauses, his tone even and cautious, "have anything to do with why you didn't go home for Thanksgiving and why you don't talk about Christmas break?"

Max doesn't reply, dropping her gaze to the floor. She doesn't want his pity and shame floods through her hotly. She doesn't want him to look at her like some wounded animal. Lucas sighs when she doesn't reply and she feels his arm drape over her shoulders as he pulls her

into a sideways hug.

"Jesus Christ, Max, I don't even know what to say."

"Just don't say anything then," she says shortly. She leans into him, letting her head rest against his collarbone. "Don't say anything."

He adjusts his arms around her, but says nothing.

Max wakes up warm in the morning and her left arm is completely numb. She jerks it, trying to get feeling back before she blinks harshly and realizes her nose is pressed into the red-checked pattern of the shirt Lucas had been wearing the night prior. She realizes they're awkwardly positioned on the too-small couch, wrapped together with their legs entangled and that's why she can't feel her arm.

She elbows him. "Lucas," she hisses. "Wake up, Stalker."

He stirs beneath her and blinks half-asleep eyes at her when he comes to. "Hey Mad Max, what's up?"

She squirms against him and slides her arm free, but the action nearly sends her toppling off the couch, and Lucas squeezes her against his chest to steady her. She blushes at the close proximity and intentionally draws away. She slides off the couch and stretches her arms above her head. She hears him yawn and sit up behind her.

It's not like they haven't fallen asleep together on Saturdays during their movie nights, but they've never woken up quite as entangled as that before. It felt personal and incredibly domestic, and as much as she tries to deny it, it felt comforting and nice.

She reaches out to check her phone and her heart sinks when she sees that Billy has sent her several texts.

Remember what I said over the break.

No unsavoury types or I swear they'll never know what hit them.

Billy's threats are so thinly veiled they might as well as punched her

in the face. He's stalked her on Facebook before and he's clearly seen the pictures of Lucas and her grinning and laughing at the arcade. Panic seizes Max's chest and she almost forgets how to breathe. For a moment, it doesn't matter that Billy is across the entire country because all she can see is Troy the douche decking Lucas in the face for having the audacity to defend Max.

She must look like she's been tased or something because Lucas coughs lightly. "Max, are you alright?"

"Fine," she says shortly. Her voice is flat and unconvincing, but her heart is racing and fear holds her tightly. "I've got somewhere to be though, so I have to run. Thank Will and Joe for me, okay?" She doesn't turn to face him—she can't—as she heads for the door and jerks on her shoes and coat.

"Hey! Max, wait!" Lucas calls after her, stumbling tiredly off the couch.

She doesn't pause, just turns and bolts out the door.

Max is only back in her room for fifteen minutes before someone's knocking on it. She hopes it's El or Dustin or Mike or even the stupid floor RA, but the knocking persists when she ignores it and her stomach sinks.

"Max!" Lucas calls. "Come on, open the door!"

He keeps up the incessant knocking for five whole minutes before Max loses her patience. She swings the door open suddenly and Lucas has to physically stop himself before he smacks her in the face trying to knock. He seems taken aback that she actually opened the door.

He's still wearing the same rumpled clothes from the night before and the gleaming bruise on his face is painfully obvious in the cheap lighting of the hallway. Concern is written all over his expression and Max has to stop herself from slamming the door in his face.

"Hey, can we talk about what the hell that was at Joe's?" he asks once he seems certain that she's not going to slam the door.

Max exhales slowly. "I had a call to make," she lies through her teeth.

Lucas frowns. "I didn't push you last night Max, so don't lie to me."

She exhales slowly, closing her eyes. "I don't think we can be friends anymore," she says shortly.

Lucas blows his breath out through his nose, looking confused and a little annoyed. "What the hell, Max? We've been friends for seven months and you just want to cut me off?" She must hesitate long enough that Lucas knows something is really wrong because he doesn't let her reply. "This is obviously not coming from you, so if I did something last night or this morning that was out of line, tell me because I don't have a clue! I thought everything was going great and last night I might have actually freaking kissed you before the whole Troy thing happened, but apparently, I read that situation all wrong too!" He sounds more frustrated than angry and when she looks at him, the emotions are written all over his face.

She loves Lucas. She loves how he wears his heart on his sleeve. She loves his quirky jokes and biting sarcasm that matches her own. She loves his dedication to his friends and his no-shit-taken personality. He's funny and clever and a whole lot better than someone as fucked up as she is deserves.

"No," she says weakly. "You don't get to say that," she insists.

Lucas glares at her, but there's no malice behind it. "And why not? Because it's true? Why are you so afraid to admit that we've had something for long enough that everyone seems to know it except us?"

Max's heart breaks. "Because you can't like me! Because I'm all kinds of fucked up! Because I'll never be able to bring you over to my house to visit or to meet my family because they'd beat the shit out of both of us because they're horrible people! Because your family showed me more kindness in one weekend than I can remember in my entire childhood and your friends have made this place more home to me than the state I lived my entire goddamn life. Because I don't know how to protect you when people attack you for being who you are or how to thank someone for sticking up for me like you did. Because I

don't know how to love you without hurting you because everyone who ever fucking loves me gets hurt!"

The words are sharp and biting and feel unfamiliar on her tongue, but they're undeniably the truth and the confession is written there, plain for him to see. Lucas is silent, eyes blown wide, and clearly taken aback. Max counts to ten silently in her head and when he doesn't move, she turns to close the door.

It's almost all the way closed when his hand shoots out to grab it. He forces it back open and steps into her room. Instead of pity and fear like she had expected, his gaze is warm and affectionate. His hands grip her upper arms and she forces herself to meet his gaze.

"Mad Max, I don't care about any of that. Your family sounds like a bunch of assholes that I don't ever need to concern myself with. I'm not afraid to be with you because you think you're broken because I look at you and I just see this girl who's witty and smart and beautiful and I think, 'Damn she's something else', because I like *you*, Max. The Party loves you, my family loved you, and you're not just some passing thing in my life. I would take a million punches from Troy for you and I would spend a million lifetimes trying to show you how loved you are. Because you are, Max, because I love you."

Lucas's confession is honest and open and something in Max's chest breaks and everything comes to a stop. She rocks forwards and kisses him hard. His hands slide up to cup her face as he kisses her back fiercely. Billy and Neil and Troy and every other stupid, racist, sexist, asshole she's ever met leave her brain as she wraps her arms around Lucas and kisses him until she can't breathe because he is real and he loves her.

She pulls back, gasping, but Lucas keeps their bodies in the same space, breathing hard. Max presses her forehead to his. Her heart pounds and she swears that she can hear his beating too.

It's not perfect and it's not easy, but she loves him. She loves him more than rockstars, and skateboards, and old fashioned arcades, and California, and sarcasm. She loves their friends and Indiana and every stupid movie he's ever played for her.

And he loves her. And it's enough.

Stranger Things 3. What a ride. So here's to hijacked motivation and my eternal sadness at how my favourite ST couple were treated this season.